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SUBJECT: FOLLOWING UP ON DPM KHOAN VISIT WITH VFM BANG

11. (SBU) Summary. Ambassador and Pol/C met with Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang on December 24 to follow up on issues from Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan's visit, about which the Vietnamese leadership appears clearly pleased. MFA will issue an invitation letter to Peace Corps. MFA will also try to track down an invitation from the Ministry of Public Security for USG experts to visit. MFA is still exploring the possibility of a Prime Ministerial visit in early 2004. Bang lamented the latest International Religious Freedom report and its potential impact on relations. He contrasted U.S. and Chinese strategies for Southeast Asia but agreed that Vietnam should host the next round of political dialogue to discuss these and other topics. Septel will discuss Bang's good news on the New Embassy Compound. End Summary.

Peace Corps

12. (U) Ambassador expressed congratulations on the successful visit to the U.S. of DPM Vu Khoan, which he praised as a "group effort" and about which he noted USG satisfaction. VFM Bang noted the instrumental role played by Ambassador Burghardt and the Embassy in making this visit such a success and conveyed the GVN's thanks to all concerned.

13. (U) Ambassador inquired about the GVN's plans for next steps vis--vis Peace Corps. He expressed concerns about some apparent interest within the GVN in having an invitation stem from the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), and noted that the Peace Corps' ultimate activities in Vietnam could likely be well beyond the mandate of MOET, even if volunteers might begin by teaching English to science and technology students. VFM Bang immediately confirmed that the invitation should come from the MFA, since this was a "political" issue that should be "handled with care." After expert talks, the GVN could decide whether the Peace Corps program would fall under MOET, the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations (VUFO), or some other agency, he said.

Intel

14. (SBU) Ambassador expressed interest in moving forward on DPM Khoan's apparent commitment to invite USG experts to return in January to meet with the Ministry of Public Security. VFM Bang promised to "look into this," but reiterated that the invitation was up to MPS. (Note: Embassy has contacted MPS twice but officials have not yet confirmed any such intention to move so quickly. end note)

Prime Minister

15. (SBU) VFM Bang expressed interest in continuing high level exchanges. He recognized the difficulty of arranging a Prime Ministerial visit in 2004 due to U.S. elections, but nonetheless inquired about the possibility of a visit in the first quarter of 2004 (he later specified March or even April). He emphasized, however, that he was not "pushing" for this to happen; if this would be difficult to arrange, the U.S. should simply let the MFA know. Ambassador asked pointedly whether Prime Minister Khai would remain in office; if not, it would be difficult to sell the idea of a lame duck visit to the Administration. VFM Bang responded only that "we will know for sure by the end of the year."

16. (U) The Ambassador also stressed that favorable GVN decisions on big ticket items such as Vinasat (Lockheed Martin) and/or Boeing would also be helpful in getting agreement on a visit. He noted, however, that 2005 might make much more sense, with the 10th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations.

Religious Freedom

17. (SBU) VFM Bang, noting a meeting in Washington with Ambassador-at-large for Religious Freedom Hanford, called

the latest International Religious Freedom Report "not conducive" to better bilateral relations. He said that the MFA had nonetheless decided not to "make a big sound" about it, apart from a short critical statement by the MFA spokesman. He claimed that, overall, the GVN was "doing better" on this front. He urged the Embassy to do a "better job" in getting accurate information. Ambassador noted that the Embassy made every effort to collect accurate information from a wide variety of sources and to prepare a fair and comprehensive report that describes problems as they exist.

The China card

18. (SBU) The Ambassador also pointed to DPM Khoan's comments on China during his various discussions in Washington. VFM Bang (who until recently was in charge of Northeast Asian relations) claimed that it was clear that the CCP's 16th Party Congress had agreed upon a "change of strategy" in which the PRC would be less inward-oriented and would reach out not only to Southeast Asia but also to Northeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa. In Southeast Asia alone, he said that the RC was "into everything," describing the PRC as "aggressive" rather than merely "active." He cited the China-ASEAN dialogue, the Free Trade Area, accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, and proposed ASEAN Regional Forum military meetings. He implied that U.S. engagement with and interest in Southeast Asia were weak in comparison.

19. (U) Ambassador reiterated earlier USG observations welcoming growing Chinese ties throughout Southeast Asia and promising continued and expanded USG ties as well. He urged that such topics be included in a future round of bilateral political dialogue, or policy planning dialogue, which it was the GVN's turn to host. VFM Bang immediately instructed Assistant Foreign Minister Nguyen Duc Hung (who headed the GVN delegation to the 2002 political dialogue) to arrange for the MFA to make preparations for such an invitation to the USG.

Comment

10. (SBU) We have heard from various Vietnamese sources that the senior leadership was very pleased with DPM Khoan's visit and with the Ambassador's personal helpful role in particular. A highlight for the Vietnamese appears to have been the meeting and meal with former President Bush, which apparently was seen as granting a sort of symbolic Confucian blessing on better U.S.-Vietnam ties.
BELLARD